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## **Revisiting Spanish Memory: George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia***

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**Abstract:** *This article explores the way in which the Spanish Civil War has been traditionally shaped in the collective memory as a Manichean conflict fought between two well-defined sides, the Republicans and the Nationalists, in order to demythologise this common representation in contemporary Spanish society. According to the recent interest shown by Spanish population for recovering its national past, I consider the civil war as a “site of memory” that needs to be periodically relived in order to satisfy the changing needs of each generation. Therefore, this article aims at reviewing the legacy of the civil war from an unusual approach, a literary contribution can provide an alternative perception of this struggle: George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* (1938). In this way, Orwell's memories are analysed in order to understand the civil war as the beginning of a social revolution, which was crushed not only by fascist forces, but also by the policy exerted by the Soviet Union in Spain by means of the communist party. In conclusion, Orwell's contribution is not only interpreted as an homage to the ordinary people who fought in order to create a new social order, but also to Georges Orwell, who led to posterity one of the most moving testimonies of the Spanish Social Revolution, an episode completely removed from Spanish memory.*

**Keywords:** Social Memory; Spanish Civil War; George Orwell; Homage to Catalonia.

### **1. The Legacy of the Spanish Civil War**

This essay explores the way in which the Spanish Civil War (1936-9) has been represented up to now as a clear-cut struggle between fascism and democracy from an unusual approach, i.e. through a literary contribution like Georges Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), because he provides an alternative model to shape Spanish memory in contemporary

society. With this aim in mind, I will first explain why it seems to me extremely reductionist to interpret the legacy of the civil war in terms of a savage discord throughout Spanish history, then to discuss after the relevance of Orwell's writings to understanding this war as the beginning of a social revolution. In this way, this study should be considered not only an homage to the ordinary people, who fought in order to establish a new social order alternative to the injustices of Capitalism in 1936's Spain, but also an homage to George Orwell, the man who left to posterity one of the most stirring testimonies of this period that is completely forgotten in Spanish collective memory.

Wars are processes which are difficult to explain and often equally difficult to understand. No war can be forgotten, no social wound can be cured completely and this is even truer if we are speaking of a civil war, whose traumas continue to be a subject of disagreement in the current political affairs, such as in the case of the Spanish Civil War. The civil war broke out with an offensive led by right-wing officers of the Spanish Army against the Government of the Second Republic on the 18th July 1936 and finished with the victory of the rebel troops led by the General Francisco Franco on the 1st April 1939, indicating the beginning of Franco's dictatorship (1939-75) that was supported abroad by Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany (Thomas, 2010).

More than seventy years later, we can see how this tragic episode is far from perceived as a merely historical event belonging to the past, if we consider the recent controversy prompted by the unsuccessful initiative of the judge Baltasar Garzón to investigate the crimes perpetrated during the civil war and its aftermath at the hands of Franco's supporters with regard to the context of international human rights laws (Martín, 2010). Garzón, who ironically has already played a central role in the prosecution of the Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet in 1998, has been finally suspended last May from his post in this trial, after being accused of perverting the Amnesty Law signed in 1977.<sup>i</sup>

Indeed, Spain continues to be today the only one 20<sup>th</sup> century democratic regime, which has not adopted official policies aimed at establishing the truth and pursuing retroactive accountability like other countries that had suffered repression under authoritarian rules. Probably, this is why the civil war still seems to be already an underlying trauma in Spanish memory, because Franco's Dictatorship imposed for almost forty years, a forced oblivion in relation to the testimonies of the defeated Republicans, which was reinforced by the so-called *Pacto del Olvido* (*Pact of Forgetting*), when the different political parties agreed to not persecute Francoist repressors in order to achieve the stability of the Spanish democratic transition.

As Madelaine Davis has observed what happened during the Spanish transition "was not that the Spaniards genuinely forgot the past but that a collective decision was made, for political purposes, to place a particular construction on the past to suppress or deemphasize those memories felt to be likely to endanger stability and consensus and to foreground those likely to promote reconciliation" (Davis, 2005: 27). In this social context, the majority of the population accepted a kind of collective amnesia in relation to the atrocities and crimes committed in the past, emphasising a new political account based on values, such as consensus and pardoning over justice and truth. It seems that the price to finish with violence and to get peace during the Spanish democratic transition was to erase the memories of the war and the repression exerted by the dictatorial regime.

However, this way of dealing with the past was called into question during the last decade by a movement coming from civil society, which aims to put light on the fate of the 300,000 Republicans killed during the war, the 440,000 persons who went into exile and the 10.000 who died in Nazi concentration camps (Preston, 1990). In particular, this campaign has been led by the non-governmental *Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory* (ARMH) that was created in December 2000 with the aim of regulating the exhumation of corpses in mass graves and organising the relevant information in archives open to the general public.

After various unsuccessful petitions demanding governmental involvement, the ARMH succeeded in 2002, in getting Spain included in the list of countries made by the *United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances*. Furthermore, in 2007, when José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero was elected as prime minister, the Spanish parliament approved the law of the Historical Memory recognising the right of those, who suffered violence or prosecution during the Civil War and Franco's regime.<sup>ii</sup>

According to this increasing interest for recovering Spanish memory, I will consider the Spanish Civil War as a *lieu de mémoire*, "a site of memory" that each generation has not only the right, but also the duty to appropriate in relation to the particularities of their present. Following Pierre Nora's interpretation, a site of memory embodies a symbolic moment "where memory crystallizes (...) a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn". In contrast to the notion of history, which "is a secular reconstruction of what is no longer", memory is in permanent evolution and needs to be periodically revived by means of remembering the crucial events, which give sense to the national past (Nora, 1989: 7).

Therefore, I would like to discuss the representation of the Spanish Civil War as a summary confrontation between loyalists of the Second Republic (1931-9) and nationalists who supported the uprising of the Spanish Army, with the help of a novel that has also been silenced for a long time in Spain. I am speaking about Georges Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*, a book that had little success when it appeared for the first time in 1938 and, in particular, in Spain where it would be published during the 70's after being completely distorted by the corrections imposed by Franco's censorship regime. Even, in the 1978 edition, when the Spanish constitution was approved, Orwell's work was judged as a poor literary contribution, which revealed the ignorance of the author "about the Spanish political history and of religious matters" (Lázaro, 2005: 121). Only in 2007, sixty-five years after Franco's death and twenty-four after the first publication of *Homage to Catalonia*, a comprehensive

Spanish edition would be published with the whole of Orwell's political essays.

Although Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* is not an historical document, but rather an autobiographical account written as kind of documentary when he joined the POUM militia (The dissident Marxist communist party) in the winter of 1937, this novel should not only be regarded as a fictional work. Indeed, Orwell wrote this novel in the first person with the aim of giving a testimony close to reality, beyond the image of the war popularised by the party propaganda of that time. In contrast to other books inspired by the civil war, which supported one or other of the ideologies taking part in this conflict, Orwell's memories questioned the image of the conflict given, by both, the Fascist and the Republican side, when the Soviet Union imposed its policy in Spain by providing munitions and military support. As Orwell explained in *Homage to Catalonia* this war should be considered a central point to understanding the rise of Totalitarianism in 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe, i.e. Fascism as well Stalinism, the version of communism imposed from the Soviet Union.

Future historians will have nothing to go upon except a mass of accusations and party propaganda. I myself have little data beyond what I saw with my own eyes and what I have learned from other eyewitnesses whom I believe to be reliable. I can, however, contradict some of the more flagrant lies and help to get the affair into some kind of perspective (Orwell, : 150).

According to Orwell's darkest premonitions, future generations of historians have continued to view the Civil War as a merely confrontation between Bolsheviks and Nationalists, which divided Spain into two homogenous sides. This propagandistic representation was not only reinforced during Franco's dictatorship, but also during the Spanish democratic transition, when this conflict was understood as the culmination of a national past nourished by a fratricidal conflict that had its roots in a common motif of early 19<sup>th</sup> century Spanish literature, the so-called *Mito de*

*las dos Españas* (the myth of two Spains). Thus, writers, such as Mariano José de Larra (1809-37) imagined the existence of a broken Spain through two polarised factions in Spanish society: a conservative, clerical and absolutist sector of the population anchored in past and progressive forces looking to the future (Juliá, 2004).

However, this political reconstruction is extremely dangerous to mirror Spanish history and, in particular, the legacy of the civil war in contemporary society, because it continues to define the present in terms of a conflict as if the war was not over. Thereby, I have chosen Orwell's narration to understand differently the various political and social forces, which played a role in warfare. Unlike other contributions, Orwell's novel shed new light on the civil war, revealing how it was an essentially triangular struggle in which not only the Fascists troops led by the General Franco were involved, but also those anti-fascist elements, who defended the liberal government of the Second Spanish Republic and those, who wanted to create a totally new society.

When the *coup d'état* was declared, the Spanish Republic Government remained completely paralysed and the first reaction was due to the population, including women and children, who took up in arms against the rebels in the main cities of Spain. On the home front and, in particular, in the cities of Madrid and Barcelona, Anarchist and Socialist workers collectivized factories and industries, proclaiming the Spanish Social Revolution, an episode that Spanish society has apparently removed from its memory (Chomsky & Pateman, 2005).

As I shall show, *Homage to Catalonia* explains that what was happening in Spain in 1936 was more complex than simply a civil war, but also the beginning of a social revolution, an event that was and remains overshadowed by the perception that the Spanish Civil War was a merely fight of democracy against fascism. Here lies precisely the relevance of Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* in pointing out that Spanish population and most of the foreigners who went to Spain to join the militias were not fighting to defend the Republic, but rather because they believed in the social revolution, i.e. an alternative position to the *status quo*. In

this respect, Orwell said:

The fact is that the Spanish working class did not [...] resist Franco in the name of democracy and the *status quo*; their resistance was accompanied by [...] a definitive revolutionary outbreak. Land was seized by the peasants; many factories and most of the transport were seized by the trade unions; churches were wrecked and the priests driven out or killed. (Orwell, : 48)

Being aware that “consciously or unconsciously, everyone writes as a partisan”, I will reconstruct the rise and fall of this spontaneous defence against Fascism led by the Spanish population by means of Orwell’s formative experience in Spain (Orwell, : 230). Throughout *Homage to Catalonia* we can follow the construction of Orwell’s political self in tragicomic terms as it was a kind of modern Quixote, from the hope of ordinary people fighting in Spain to the disillusionment towards the Communist ideals and the Totalitarian nightmare of the Days of May in Barcelona.

## **2. A Modern Quixote: Orwell in Spain**

Eric Arthur Blair, most commonly known for his pseudonym, Georges Orwell was born in 1903 in Motihari, the headquarters of East Champaran district, then belonging to the British India Empire. However, his mother raised Orwell in England and he would only return to Asia, when he decided to join the Indian Imperial Police in Burma, now Myanmar, at the age of nineteenth years old. This five-year period led him to become aware of what Western Imperialism meant and its extreme forms of exploitation, which would be the subject of his novel, *Burmese Days* (1934). Although Orwell was already well known for his engagement against capitalism before taking part in the Spanish Civil War, Spain would be the definitive experience to shape his political ideals. As Orwell wrote in his later essay, *Why I write* (1946), the civil war showed him the meaning of justice and liberty against the terror of Totalitarianism.

The Spanish war and other events in 1936-37 turned the scale and thereafter I knew where I stood. Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism, as I understand it. (Orwell, 2005: 8)

Orwell decided to go to Spain the autumn of 1936, when the offensive of Franco's Army was putting the government of the Second Spanish Republic in a desperate situation. The so called Spanish Popular Front, the electoral coalition of liberal republicans, socialists and communists, which won the 1936 election, collapsed and was practically ineffective in responding to the fascist menace with a clear defensive strategy. However, the urban masses made a collective effort in order to prevent the victory of the military revolt in Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia, organising militias in the Sierra del Guadarrama, the mountains of Madrid, in Huesca and Saragossa and, finally in Toledo, near the Alcázar.<sup>iii</sup>

The news about the Spanish political situation was widely reported by the International press and inflamed the population of the main European countries at every level, opening a debate about the legitimacy of intervention in Spain. On one hand, the French government of Leon Blum and the English of Arthur N. Chamberlain decided to adopt the famous policy of non-intervention preventing the supply munitions or other military aid to either of two sides. Although the official reason for the non intervention was to prevent the outbreak of a Second World War, one of the most direct consequences was to put the Spanish government in disadvantageous position, because Adolf Hitler's Germany and Benito Mussolini's Italy would not respect this agreement, supporting Franco's rebellion and, notably, sending military aid such as the Condor Legion, a bomber group formed by several squadrons of aircraft fighters. As a result of the embargo, the Republican government was forced to purchase munitions from the Soviet Union involving a decisive ideological turn in the development of warfare.

On the other hand, the non-intervention policy in Spain was motivated by other less official governmental reasons,

such as the awakening of revolutionary sympathies amongst the French and British left wing towards the Spanish working class, which were perceived as a social menace by the most conservative sectors of European politics. Indeed, Spain became a political symbol for many dissident artists, intellectuals, poets and dreamers, who mirrored in this country all their hopes towards the experiment of a social revolution that was definitively working. As thousands of foreign sympathisers, Orwell was ready to make their way towards the Pyrenees, “[...] where the Revolution was to bring the kingdom of Heaven on earth [...]” (Horn, 1990: 42).

Briefly after his departure, we know that Orwell visited the headquarters of the Communist party in London, King Street, in order to get a passport to go to Spain. However, he would finally obtain a letter of recommendation from Fenner Brockway, the General Secretary of the *Independent Labour Party* (ILP), who would put Orwell in contact with John McNair, the party’s representative in Barcelona, who also managed British aid in the POUM. This explains why Orwell, who was more sympathetic to the Communist Party at first, would finally join the POUM militia, a Spanish communist party formed during the Second Spanish Republic in opposition to Stalinism and the pro-Moscow orientation of the Third International (Taylor, 2005).

Orwell began his journey to Spain on the 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1936, but he would make a stop in Paris for some days, where he would meet his friend, the popular writer Henry Miller (1891-1980) in his Montparnasse studio. For almost seven years, Orwell had not visited this city, where he had lived in an ambiance marked by poverty and misery that had inspired *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), his first full-length work. From Paris, he went to the south of France by train and, then crossed the Spanish border. Orwell arrived in Barcelona at the end of December, i.e. six months after the uprising of Franco’s troops. Although he had travelled to Spain as a journalist to report on the situation to the English working class, he would join the militia immediately, the only idea on his mind being to kill fascists. As he explained at the beginning of *Homage to Catalonia*:

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This was in late December 1936, less than seven months ago as I write, and yet it is a period that has already receded into enormous distance (...) I had come to Spain with some notion of writing newspaper articles, but I had joined the militia almost immediately, because at that time and in that atmosphere it seemed the only conceivable thing to do (Orwell, 1980: 4).

On his arrival, Orwell discovered a city that was transformed into a Proletarian state. However, he knew little about the complex situation in which Spain was involved and the enormous differences between the acronyms, which represented the different political parties and trade unions: the Anarchist union CNT-FAI, which was in control of Barcelona and its industrial suburbs, the POUM, which was associated with Trotskyism, the UGT (the Union of Socialist workers), which was strongest in the mines and the industrial plants of Bilbao and Madrid, the PSOE (The Spanish Socialist Party) and the PCE (the Communist Party) that had also formed in Catalonia the PSCU, i.e. the Catalan communist party “[...]founded at the beginning of 1936 through the amalgamation of socialists and communists[...].” (Nash, 1995: 232).

Walking down the Ramblas, the wide central artery of the town, Orwell was captivated at first sight by all the revolutionary symbols and he described with enthusiasm and fascination how the loudspeakers blasted out the latest revolutionary songs and all the people wore blue overalls, the working class clothes that had become the militia uniform. Impressed by this idyllic atmosphere, he gave one the most moving testimonies of the Spanish Social Revolution, an episode in which he recognised immediately “a state of affairs worth fighting for”.

Servile and even ceremonial forms of speech had temporarily disappeared. Nobody said *Señor* or *Don* or even *Usted*, everyone called everyone else “Comrade” and “Thou” and said *Salud* instead of *Buenos días*. [...] In outward appearance it was a town in which the wealthy classes had practically ceased to exist. Except

for a small number of women and foreigners there were no “well-dressed” people at all. Practically everyone wore rough working-class clothes, or blue overalls or some variant of the militia uniform. (Orwell, : 5)

After some days visiting the city with the Spanish writer Victor Alba (1916-2003), a *protégé* of McNair, the ILP's representative in Spain, Orwell would complete military training in the Lenin Barracks, the POUM headquarter, where he got in touch for the first time with Spaniards meeting also other foreigner volunteers, such as the popular Italian militiaman. During his instruction, Orwell would become familiar with Spanish customs, such as to drink wine from the *porrón*, “a sort of glass bottle”, which was especially disgusting for him and the unpunctuality, a typical habit deeply rooted in Spanish culture, which exasperated his “Northern time-neurosis”. As if he were a kind of anthropologist, he made an interesting study of Spanish temperament in a comic way.

Every foreigner who served in the militia spent his first few weeks in learning to love the Spaniards and in being exasperated by certain of their characteristics [...] The Spaniards are good for many things but not at making war [...] The one Spanish word that no foreigner can avoid learning is *mañana* –“tomorrow” (literally, “the morning”). Whenever it is conceivably possible, the business of today is put off until *mañana*. This is so notorious that even Spaniards themselves make jokes about it (Orwell, : 13)

The time that Orwell spent in the Lenin Barracks was not especially useful in terms of military instruction, but rather to develop his ethnographic vision in learning some basic notions about the Spanish militia. The militias were organised by the different trade unions and political parties and, thereby they varied greatly from one another, not forming parts of a single army but independent groups of armed men and women controlled by autonomous political factions (Richardson, 1976: 2). Even, the President of the Spanish Republic named in September 1936, Francisco Largo Caballero (1869-1946), recognised privately that he

had no control on worker's militias at least until 1937, when they were dissolved and reorganised in the People's Republican Army, which would definitively forbid the participation of women on the front (Martín & Ordóñez, 2009).

In contrast to the usual idea that we have today of an army, the militias were characterised fundamentally by antimilitarism and, thereby, there was no bourgeoisie hierarchy or distinction between men and women according to the Libertarian approach (See Figure 1). However, the romantic image of the Spanish militia, which showed how the ruling classes had ceased to exist, posed some problems in the practice, because each decision need to be discussed in a democratic way. The militia was composed by men with no rank, no titles, inspired by a model of social equality, but also without weapons, food and other provisions. Indeed, this revolutionary army did not wear a uniform, but a colourful multiform, because it was not composed by soldiers, but rather by civilians moved by the ideal of the social revolution.

I have spoken of the militia uniform, which probably gives a wrong impression. It was not exactly a uniform. Perhaps a "multiform" would be the proper name for it. Everyone's clothes followed the same general plan, but they were never quite the same in any two cases [...] Everyone wore a zipper jacket, but some of the jackets were of leather, others of wool and of every conceivable colour. The kinds of cap were about as numerous as their wearers. It was usual to adorn the front of your cap with a party badge (Orwell, : 8)

After this week of training in the Lenin Barracks, Orwell was finally sent to the Aragon Front to fight in a *centuria* that was led by Georges Kopp, a Belgian engineer volunteer, who would be involved in the riots of Barcelona. The time he spent in the Aragon Front, first in Barbastro station and, then in Siétamo and Alcubierre, was fully depicted through "the physical memories, the sounds, the smells and the surfaces of things" (Orwell, 2006: 346). The life in the trenches was characterised by very little military action, the lack of aliments, cigarettes and munitions, excrements and,

overall, the very cold winter of Huesca. All those elements composed what Orwell called "the smell of the war" (Orwell, 1980: 140).



(Figure 1) *The POUM against the Fascist Air Force.*  
Courtesy of the *Anselmo Lorenzo Foundation* (Madrid, Spain)

Orwell's meticulous descriptions of life on the front were strongly inspired by the collective memory of the First World War (1914-8) and, in particular, by the Modernist literary tradition of war books, such as Robert Grave's *Good-bye to all that*, Erich Maria Remarque's *Im Westen nicht Neues* (*All Quiet on the Western Front*) and Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, which were all published in 1929. As Patricia Rae has observed Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* echoed this cultural background in order to emphasise the worst horrors of warfare from the point of view of the individual soldier, who is "betrayed by the generals who prosecute and also, by those on the front who buy the representations of war propagated in the popular press" (Rae, 2009: 248).

In short, Orwell's experience on the Aragon front was neither idyllic, nor heroic, but most likely tragicomic as if he portrayed himself as a kind of Don Quixote fighting against a fictional enemy. The Aragon front was relatively quiet and this gave the impression of a war, which was not at all a tragedy. Furthermore, the Republicans used to make war not with weapons, but with megaphones trying to convert the enemy by means of political speeches, "instead of shooting him" (Orwell, : 17). These unusual methods of warfare reinforced the image of a war that was more likely "a comic opera with an occasional death" (Orwell, : 32).

The first time that Orwell met a real fascist was in Alcubierre, when two young male deserters were brought from the front line. Although Orwell described his excitement at this event, he would later recognise that "they were indistinguishable from ourselves, except that they wore khaki overalls" like the supposed enemy (Orwell, : 17). However, this comic vision of the war would turn to dark paranoia, when Orwell returned to Barcelona in the spring of 1937 to meet Eileen, his wife. During the Days of May, Orwell would meet for the first time "a person whose profession was telling lies", realising the essential role played by propaganda in modern warfare and also, that the real enemy of the Spanish Social Revolution was not Franco's fascism, but some of his comrades who were fighting on the Republican front (Orwell, : 140).

### **3. The Totalitarian Nightmare**

When Orwell returned to Barcelona after more than three months on the front, in April 1937, he found a completely different city, which was no longer the idyllic Proletarian state collectivised by the working class, but a society that had re-established class divisions. Thus, he explained:

A deep change had come over the town. There were two facts that were the keynote of all else. One was that the people, the civil population, had lost much of their interest in the war; the other was that the normal division of society into rich and poor, upper class and lower class, was reasserting itself (Orwell, : 110-1).

On his arrival in the seaport town, Orwell perceived an oppressive atmosphere that mirrored like a microcosm the imminent eruption of a broader political crisis, i. e. the replacement of Francisco Largo Caballero by Juan Negrín as prime minister of the Second Spanish Republic. Furthermore, during the spring of 1937, the course of the war would change radically as a result of the rapprochement with the Soviet Union, which did not respect the embargo signed with England and France becoming also the main ally of the Spanish government.

At that time, the Soviet Union was ruled by Josef Stalin (1878-1953), who came to power after crushing the revolutionary movement led by Leon Trotsky, one of the most influent personalities in the Russian Revolution of 1917. According to Stalin's politics, it was necessary to eliminate any revolutionary effort and, thereby, he orchestrated the so-called Moscow trials, which were aimed at eliminating any potential challengers to Stalin's authority and, in particular, the Bolsheviks who had participated in the October revolution, including Trotsky. Therefore, the help provided by the Soviet Union sending munitions and military support by means of recruiting soldiers to fight in the International Brigades was not only out of solidarity, but it was rather a political strategy to give a new ideological orientation to the Spanish Civil War, where Anarchists and Trotskyites were

especially strong. Although historians continue to argue about the precise nature of the Soviet war in Spain, “[...] one aspect of its strategy at least was certain: it was not intended to promote any kind of social revolution [...]” (Taylor, 2003: 204).

One of the consequences of the Russian involvement in the conflict was the increasing power of the Spanish Communist Party in the government, which until this moment had little representation in the parliament in relation to other political forces. Moreover, as Browne states, “the dependence for arms upon the Soviet Union affected both politics and military strategy” in warfare involving some relevant changes, such as the dissolution of the worker’s militias in order to create an unified army (Browne, 1996: 80). As Orwell observed these political changes could be perceived through the slogans of the Republican propaganda, which now emphasised how the main objective was not to continue the revolution, but rather to win the war and to achieve this, it was necessary to incorporate the “ill-trained, undisciplined militia” into the “heroic” Popular Army (Orwell: 112).

This campaign of discredit against the CNT and the POUM would accelerate the tensions between the different political factions. At the beginning of May 1937, Orwell had the impression that a new sort of civil war would break out within the Civil War in the streets of Barcelona.

By May 1937 things had reached a point at which some kind of violent outbreak could be regarded as inevitable. The immediate cause of friction was the Government's order to surrender all private weapons, coinciding with the decision to build up a heavily-armed “non-political” police-force from which trade union members were to be excluded. The meaning of this was obvious to everyone; and it was also obvious that the next move would be the taking over of some of the key industries controlled by the C.N.T. (Orwell: 150)

Precisely, the street battles in Barcelona started, when government forces tried to move the anarchists away from the Telephone Exchange building, which had been one of the

most important CNT headquarters since the beginning of the war. At that moment, Orwell's dream of a new social order would turn into paranoia, when he realised that other kinds of fascism were hovering in the sky of Barcelona to silence the revolutionary spirit in Spain. During the so called "Barcelona May days", the Government of the Second Spanish Republic led at that moment, by the socialist and communist parties, accused the CNT and the POUM of having collaborated with the nationalists exerting a brutal repression against these trade unions (Thomas, 2001: 635-7).

After six days of fighting in the streets of Barcelona, the prime minister Largo Caballero resigned his position, anarchists such as the Health minister Federica Montseny (1905-1994) were forced to leave their posts, the POUM was illegalised and hundreds or even thousands of affiliated to these trade unions were arrested, jailed and, in many cases, tortured and executed like the popular Catalan leader, Andrés Nin (1892-1937). Finally, Orwell's nightmare became real, when he realised that the enemy of the social revolution was not a soldier wearing a kaki uniform like the fascists, but most likely "a fat Russian agent" explaining how all that happened in Barcelona was an "Anarchist plot" (Orwell: 140).

In Barcelona, during all those last weeks I spent there, there was a peculiar evil feeling in the air –an atmosphere of suspicion, fear, uncertainty, and veiled hatred. The May fighting had left ineradicable after-effects behind it. With the fall of the Caballero Government the Communists had come definitely into power, the charge of internal order had been handed over to Communists ministers, and no one doubted that they would smash their political rivals as soon as they got a quarter of a chance (Orwell: 193)

In this oppressive atmosphere, Orwell became aware of the central role played by the propaganda as a mechanism, which produced "[...] ideologically correct, updated versions of reality [...]" making lies of the truth and rewriting the past if necessary (Orwell, 1981: 42). Furthermore, propaganda became one of the most powerful weapons in the Spanish Civil War because it was the first conflict to be covered by a

corps of professional photographers, coinciding with the establishment of the modern photojournalism (Sontag, 2002; Brothers, 1997). Both sides, the nationalists and the republicans, used this modern way of manipulating reality to spread the news about the Barcelona fighting.

On one hand, the conservative *The Daily Mail* portrayed in the British press Franco as a patriot delivering his country from hordes of “reds” who were planning a Red Revolution funded by Moscow, when the communists were the real enemy of the social revolution in Spain. On the contrary, *The Daily Worker*, which was a pro-communist newspaper, explained how the Barcelona fighting was definitely a Fascist plot, which had been carried out by the POUM with the idea of paralysing the government. In short, for the British left wing and, in particular, from the communist point of view “the P.O.U.M. was wholly responsible and [...] was acting under Fascist orders” (Orwell: 150). Here lies the essence of Orwell’s totalitarian nightmare, which would inspire *Animal Farm* (1945) and in *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1949), in “a shifting phantasmagoric world in which black may be white tomorrow and yesterday’s weather can be changed by decree” (Orwell, 2006: 348)

After Barcelona days of May, Orwell went back to the Aragon front, where he would be wounded receiving a bullet in the throat. He was hospitalised in Siétamo, Barbastro, Lleida and finally in the suburbs of Barcelona, being declared unfit for service. Meanwhile, in Barcelona the social revolution was definitively extinguished and the political situation became increasingly dangerous for those who had been related to the POUM. Therefore, Orwell and his wife planned to escape. In June 1937, they crossed the Spanish frontier and arrived to the French village of Banyuls sur Mer. Once in France, Orwell was definitively a different man, who had been radically transformed by his journey in Spain and returned to England believing in socialism, something that “he had never done before” (Ingle, 2005: 45)

Looking back to the Spanish Civil War, he remembered these six months as a defining moment in his life. However, the social revolution had finally failed, crushed by communist forces, the whole experience would leave in him with more belief in the decency of human beings. His memories of the civil war were not at all neutral, but rather

an “embodied account of truth”, i.e. an alternative vision to the dominant approach, which emphasised a Manichean interpretation of this conflict from, both, the republican and the nationalist side.<sup>iv</sup> Thus, Orwell’s descriptions were “[...] all mixed up with sights, smells and sounds. The smell of the trenches, the mountains dawns away into inconceivable distances, the frosty crackle of bullets, the roar and glare of bombs; the clear cold light of the Barcelona mornings, and the stamp of boots in the barrack yard, back in December when people still believed in the revolution [...]”(Orwell: 230).

As I have tried to show in this article, George Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia* should be considered a precious testimony to view this historical episode, which reveals how this struggle was most probably a three-cornered fight involving various social forces, such as Anarchists, Trotskyites, Communists and Liberals. Even Franco’s attempt was not really comparable with Hitler and Mussolini’s totalitarian projects, because he did not strictly want to impose fascism, but rather to restore feudalism and this meant that Franco had against him not only the working class, but also the liberal bourgeoisie.

From a worldview perspective, Spain had become also the political arena in which the main forms of totalitarianism came together giving raise in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Western societies to: Benito Mussolini’s Fascism, Adolf Hitler’s Nazism and the Stalinism coming from the Soviet Union. Furthermore, France and England had played a decisive role in the final victory of Franco. Although they had theoretically supported a policy of non-intervention, the embargo exerted against the Second Spanish Republic turned out to be an essential factor in the rapprochement to the politics of Moscow.

Finally, we can see in the light of Orwell’s novel how the Spanish Civil War did not seem to have been a conflict fought exclusively amongst Spaniards and for causes that only they could understand, a common belief, which only reinforces the traumatic dimension of this period. As Orwell expressed in writing *Homage to Catalonia*, this war had a broad international dimension, having a deep impact amongst most of the 40,000 foreigners, who fought on the Republican side and, moreover, in the collective memory of

early 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe. Indeed, it would be remembered as an ideological war that had inflamed the passions, fear and hopes of intellectuals, artists and, overall, the ordinary people, who believed in the possibility of a new political form of democratic organisation that was not only an auxiliary model to liberal democracy, but “also a model in itself in theory and in practice” (Olson, 1997: 488).

In conclusion, Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia* is one of the few books that reported on the Spanish Social Revolution, a fundamental episode in the development of the civil war and, moreover, in Spanish history, because it was one of the most deep-seated attempts at social transformation in 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe, not only in economical terms, but also in cultural and educational aspects. In this way, the significance of Orwell’s testimony in relation to the contemporary efforts made to recover Spanish historical memory stems from the fact that it reveals that what was happening in Spain was not only a tragic event full of horrors, but also “a new beginning in history” (Arendt, 2006: 11). Keeping in mind that most of people responded to Franco’s offensive with the belief that a fairer world, we can perceive how *Homage to Catalonia* embodies the meaning of the Spanish Social revolution as it was lived by Orwell, i.e. as a belief in a world, in which “human beings were trying to behave as human beings and not as cogs in the capitalist machine” (Orwell: 6)

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> This controversy can be followed in Editorial (2010 April, 8). An Injustice in Spain. *The New York Times*, 16 in <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/09/opinion/09fri2.html>

<sup>ii</sup> The Law of Historical Memory can be consulted on line in the web of the Spanish Ministry of Justice [http://ley memoria.mjjusticia.es/paginas/es/ley\\_memoria.html](http://ley memoria.mjjusticia.es/paginas/es/ley_memoria.html)

<sup>iii</sup> In relation to the political changes during the Second Spanish Republic, it must be consulted Jackson, G. (1970) The Spanish Popular Front, 1934-7, *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 5, no. 3, pp. 21-3.

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<sup>iv</sup> To have more information about the embodied theory of vision, see also Haraway, D. (1988) *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective* *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, pp. 575-599.

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